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ABSTRACT

The first purpose of this study was to identify significant factors affecting the first benchmark in retaining students in college--the decision to enroll in the first fall semester after orientation. The second purpose was to examine enrollment decisions at the second benchmark--the decision to re-enroll in the second fall semester after freshman orientation. The study was conducted at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond with 2,262 new and transfer freshman applicants who attended orientation in 1989. The Supplementary Enrollment Information instrument developed locally by the institution was used to collect data. Chi square analysis and t-tests were used to analyze the data. Family encouragement, the need for writing skills, belief in self, the goal to obtain a degree, amount of commitment, and living arrangements were important variables in deciding to enroll at the first benchmark. The decision to return to college at the second fall semester seems to be influenced by external factors such as minimal or no employment and the work environment, and by the student's level of involvement and success in academic pursuits. The two factors that were important at both benchmarks were the goal to obtain a degree and the firm or extra commitment to that goal. Sixteen tables and two figures present study findings. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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BENCHMARK FACTORS IN STUDENT RETENTION

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BENCHMARK FACTORS IN STUDENT RETENTION

Student persistence and attrition at four-year colleges and universities have been studied from various angles including home environment, campus environment, academic rules and regulations, student demographic characteristics, and satisfaction with the services provided at the college. It has also been suggested that the preparation and approaches used in the learning climate that enhance the education of students also foster persistence in college. Bolton and Kammeyer (1967), for example, recommended long ago that students involved in on-campus residence programs, student friendships, and caring faculty and staff were found to correlate positively with student retention.

Other researchers have named financial aid, transfers, poor performance, illness, and indecision as reasons for attrition. Academic preparation for college, level of parents' education, high school rank and high school grade point average, and prior attendance at a junior college or another four-year college also have been recognized as factors which influence students to remain in school until degree completion (Douzenis, 1990).

Surveys and exit interviews conducted at timely intervals have been traditional approaches to assessing the reasons for students dropping out of school. Earwood-Smith (1989) asserted that students should be considered consumers; if they are satisfied with the service, they like the product and become regular customers. Earwood-Smith continued that any intervention for retention should occur while students were enrolled; not after they had left the institution.

When survey and exit interview information are disseminated throughout the campus areas, changes should result from the information. The study by Earwood-Smith in 1989 showed that as student satisfaction increased, so did the rate of student retention. Tinto (1990) highlighted three important principles of institutional action that can lead to effective retention: (1) the principle of community in that institutions include students in the mainstream of campus life, (2) the principle of commitment in that the institution has an abiding commitment to retention, and (3) the institutional focus on the broader scope of the education of the students.

Tinto (1987) emphasized that the initial intent of the student regarding his or her educational participation is a strong predictor of persistence or attrition. Bean (1982) stated that if institutions survey educational goals and commitments of their incoming students as opposed to the currently enrolled students, then the institution can more accurately predict persistence or withdrawal. These findings, coupled with the identification of other variables between persisters and non-persisters, initiated a study of persistence variables at defined benchmark intervals.

Purpose

The first purpose of the study was to identify significant factors influencing the first benchmark: the decision to enroll in the first fall semester after orientation. The second purpose was to examine enrollment decisions at the second benchmark: the decision to re-enroll the second fall semester after freshman orientation.

Methodology

This study was conducted on the campus of Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. The subjects in the study were 2,262 new and transfer freshmen applicants who attended freshman orientation in June, July, or August of 1989. The Supplementary Enrollment Information instrument (SEI) developed locally by the institution was used to collect the data. This instrument was designed to measure these potential students' characteristics, goals, and attitudes toward self, family, and educational commitment. It was integrated into the "final exam" which was administered at the end of freshman orientation. Demographic data on these applicants allowed the researchers to examine retention at each benchmark interval by gender, ethnicity, age, ACT scores, and entrance categories.

Results and Discussion

Chi-square analysis and *t*-tests were used to analyze the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was the software used. The mainframe VAX computer at Southeastern Louisiana University (Hammond) was used for the statistical computation.

The first benchmark, decisions to enroll in the first fall semester after orientation, is listed in Table 1. Of the 2,262 applicants who took the SEI instrument, 2,037 enrolled in the Fall 1989 semester while 225 did not enroll. It appears that the factors of family encouragement, the need for writing skills, belief in self, the goal to obtain a degree, amount of commitment for that degree, and living arrangements were important variables in deciding to enroll at the first benchmark.

Table 1: Significant variables at 1st Benchmark

Variable	Chi-Square	DF	p
Family encouragement	5.89628	1	$<.05$
Writing skills improvement	4.33694	1	$<.05$
Belief in self	4.07984	1	$<.05$
Goal is to obtain degree	17.49997	1	$<.05$
Commitment is firm or extra firm to obtain degree	11.55056	1	$<.05$
No children	15.51603	2	$<.05$
Living in a family setting	3.85983	1	$<.05$
Orientation date after early June	77.47536	5	$<.05$

It was also found that those applicants who attended orientation but did not enroll in the next fall semester tended to leave more blanks and make more errors on the orientation test than the applicants who did enroll in the next fall semester ($t_{(2260)} = 2.58$, $p<.05$). This result might suggest that applicants who did enroll showed more attention to detail, more interest in college preparation, and a deeper commitment to a college education than those applicants who showed more blanks.

The following tables show the results on the variables found to be significant. The significance level was less than .05.

Table 2: Family encouraged student to attend college

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Disagree	13.1%	89.6%
Agree	9.0%	91.0%

Table 3: Needed help in writing skills

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Little or no help needed	11.1%	88.9%
Needed medium or more help	8.5%	91.5%

Table 4: Needed assistance in belief in self

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Little or no help needed	9.0%	91.0%
Needed medium or more help	12.0%	88.0%

Table 5: Specific educational goals

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Take specific courses to get degree	8.2%	91.8%
Take a few courses	14.1%	85.7%

Table 6: Commitment to graduate

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Commitment is not firm	13.6%	86.4%
Commitment is firm or extra firm	8.6%	91.4%

Table 7: Have children to care for

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
No children	8.9%	91.1%
Have children 18 years or older	17.0%	83.0%
Have children under 18	16.0%	84.0%

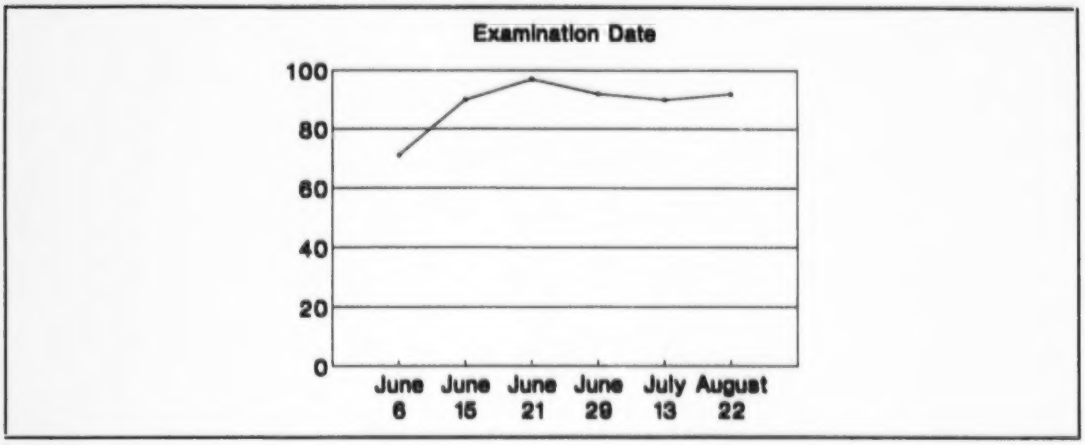
Table 8: Living location

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Not in a family setting	11.3%	88.7%
Living in a family setting	8.8%	91.2%

Table 9: Blanks on orientation exam

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Average number of blanks	0.8489	0.2808

The following graph depicts the dates of the orientation sessions the applicants attended. While the sessions were significantly different at $p < .05$, it appears that applicants who participated in earliest orientations were less likely to enroll the following fall semester than applicants who participated in later orientation sessions.



The second benchmark interval is shown in Table 10. This interval is defined as fall-to-fall retention of students who attended summer 1989 orientation and enrolled in Fall 1989; while 1,273 re-enrolled, 764 did not re-enroll.

Table 10: Significant variables at 2nd Benchmark

Variable	Chi-Square	DF	p
Working less than 10 hours per week	7.35477	1	<.05
Employment is located on campus	11.42135	2	<.05
Goal is to obtain a degree	16.20709	1	<.05
Commitment is firm or extra firm to obtain a degree	9.52883	1	<.05
Youngest or middle child in family	3.94651	1	<.05
Attended orientation before late August	44.07866	5	<.05

The following tables show the results on the variables found to be significant. The significance level was less than .05.

Table 11: Employment levels

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Work 10 or less hours per week	34.4%	65.6%
Work more than 10 hours per week	40.3%	59.7%

Table 12: Employment locations

	Not enroiled	Enrolled
Work on campus	30.0%	70.0%
Work off campus	40.2%	59.8%
Work both on and off campus	40.6%	59.4%

Table 13: Specific educational goals

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Obtain specific courses/get a degree	34.9%	65.1%
Take a few courses	44.7%	55.3%

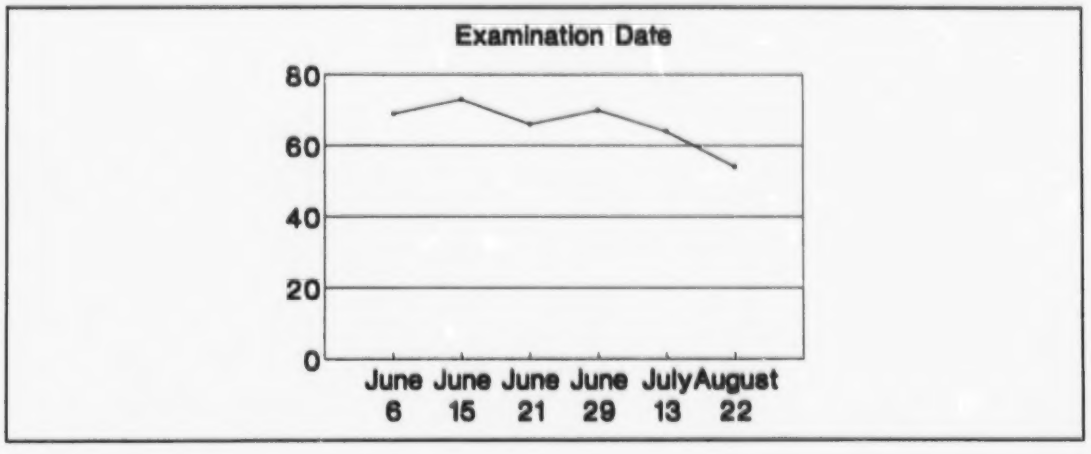
Table 14: Commitment to graduate

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Commitment is not firm	43.2%	56.8%
Commitment is firm or extra firm	35.6%	64.4%

Table 15: Birthorder

	Not enrolled	Enrolled
Oldest or only child	40.2%	59.8%
Middle or youngest child	35.8%	64.2%

The following graph shows that students who returned at the second benchmark interval were least likely to have tested in late August. Students who attended late August orientation were late applicants to the University. We have some evidence from other studies which indicates that students who apply late have relatively low persistence rates. Perhaps the psychological, personal, and financial circumstances which result in applying for admission a few days before classes start are not conducive to success and persistence in school.



Students re-enrolling the second fall semester also differed on the following demographic variables: gender, ethnicity, entry status, current standing, cumulative grade point hours, and hours enrolled. These results are shown in Table 16.

Table 16

Variable	Chi-Square	DF	p
Females were more likely to return than males	6.19593	1	>.05
White, non-Hispanics were more likely to return than African-Americans[1]	7.34514	1	>.05
"Regular" entering freshmen were more likely to return than developmental or transfer freshmen[2]	9.97241	2	>.05
Students with higher standing were more likely to return than lower standing (Dean's list to suspension)	186.01554	3	>.05

Summary and Discussion

This investigation confirmed that different factors affect students' enrollment decisions at different points within their educational careers. It seems that the initial decision is based on "precollege characteristics" (Terenzini, 1987) which include encouragement from family members, how far the student lives from school, the fact that the student does not have children, the belief in self to succeed, and the need for increased math and study skills.

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[1]Later studies on Fall 1990 to Fall 1991 and Fall 1991 to Fall 1992 retention showed that freshman retention rates for whites and African-Americans were statistically equivalent.

[2]Later studies on Fall 1990 to Fall 1991, and Fall 1991 to Fall 1992 retention showed that freshman retention rates for regular and developmental freshmen were statistically equivalent.

The decision to return to college at the second fall semester seems to be influenced by external factors such as minimal or no employment and the work environment and by the student's level of involvement and success in academic pursuits. For example, students with higher ACT Comprehensive scores, better grades (academic standing), higher cumulative grade point averages, more cumulative hours enrolled and carrying a full-time credit load at the end of the first fall semester tended to re-enroll the second fall semester. These characteristics are consistent with Tinto's (1975) theory that persisting is reflective of interaction by the student with the social and academic programs of the college. Terenzini (1987) also said that if the student's personal and academic growth is enhanced by the college, it is logical to presume that the student will return to this environment.

It also should be noted that students who make last minute decisions to enroll in college appear to have low retention rates. Factors that are present in preventing early planning for enrollment may continue to be present during the first year of college.

While these other influences had considerable impact on the decision to either enroll initially in college or to re-enroll, the two factors that were consistent at both benchmarks were the goal to obtain a degree and the firm or extra firm commitment to that goal.

There is a substantial amount of literature on retention of students and academic environments that produce higher retention. Furthermore, studies have been done that concentrate at certain grade levels within the college as to when retention efforts are most needed. The student's decision to re-enroll at each semester might fluctuate as a result of

changing needs and influences. Recognition of this fact and careful observation, interpretation, and problem solving by both the institution and the academic advisor can assist in overcoming the barriers which could cause the student to withdraw from the school.

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